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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Where to now for Irish Catholicism?

*The problems that are besetting the Catholic Church in Ireland will ultimately lead to a new, more theologically informed, open and charitable institution, writes **Eamon Maher***

I have read some interesting treatment of the current state of Irish Catholicism in recent months. The first was in an essay by Dr Tom Inglis, Senior Lecturer in Sociology in UCD, and a renowned commentator on the evolution of the Catholic Church in Ireland. It was published in a collection I co-edited with Michael Böss, *Engaging Modernity: Readings of Irish Politics, Culture and Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Veritas, 2003). Inglis' essay, entitled 'Catholic Church, Religious Capital and Symbolic Domination,' (pp.43-70) charts the way in which the religious habitus has evolved in this country. Formerly, being perceived as a good Catholic was a means to social advancement in Ireland. Inglis points out that this is no longer the case at the beginning of the third millennium.

"Being a good Catholic is no longer as significant as it once was in attaining success in business, politics or other fields of social life.

It is no longer tied in with receiving a good education, health care, or access to welfare services."

He goes on to say that being a good Catholic is still an important part of many people's lives in Ireland but that it has "increasingly turned into a private affair. It is becoming more of an end in itself rather than a means towards other ends, that is material or worldly success." (p.43)

Using the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Inglis examines what the French sociologist refers to as 'religious capital,' and argues that its decline in Ireland has resulted in the sort of post-Christian or secularised society in which we now find ourselves.

Religion not abandoned

Terms like 'post-Christian' and 'secularised' do not indicate a total abandonment of religion by the Irish people. The increased number of pilgrims going to Lough Derg and Croagh Patrick and the unprecedented three

million people who went to see the relics of Saint Thérèse when they were brought to our shores in 2001, show that there is at the very least still a healthy commitment to things spiritual in Ireland.

In the past, when Irish people deviated from the church's moral teaching, there was little option other than to opt out of the religious field altogether and become atheists or agnostics. In the Ireland of today, many people who don't agree with church teaching on issues such as divorce, contraception, abortion, or homosexuality, still remain nominally 'Catholic.' They also experiment with other spiritual paths such as yoga, transcendental meditation, etc. In other words, the Catholic Church is just one option among many as a means of finding spiritual nourishment and fulfilment.

Difficult to access

All of which makes it difficult to assess the level of commitment there is to Catholicism in Ireland.

We are constantly hearing from the media about the move away from organised religion as a result of the clerical sex scandals – and certainly the mishandling of these by the hierarchy has caused much anger and pain to sincere Catholics, lay people and clerics alike. And yet what commentators fail to take into account is the intrinsic need for religion that still remains in the Irish psyche. It is not possible for a country as committed as Ireland has been to Catholicism to suddenly find itself deprived of its religious inheritance.

Social change has been frighteningly rapid in the past few decades, and many men and women, while they are clearly better off in terms of material wealth, are somewhat lost when it comes to dealing with the hard questions that life throws at them: the death of someone close to them; terminal illness; depression; the breakdown of marriage or a relationship. In the past, while the Catholic Church was responsible for inculcating a negative attitude to sexuality in particular, at least it did provide the promise of eternal happiness to those who adhered to its dictates.

In Tomás Ó Criomhthain's classic account of the closing decades of life on the Blaskets, there is a stoicism and resilience in the face of adversity that are extremely rare in the Ireland of today. This man lost his wife and children, sometimes in tragic circumstances, and yet his unflinching faith in an all-powerful God gave him the strength to keep going. As he wrote after one of the many crosses that came his way: "It was imprinted on my mind that there was no cure for these things but to meet them with endurance as best I could." Such fortitude is not as easy to come by in a society which has turned its back on the concept of a loving God.

The end of Irish Catholicism?

Dr Vincent Twomey has produced a book (*The End of Irish Catholicism?*, Veritas, 2003) that

will form the basis for the second part of this discussion. Dr Twomey is a well-known theologian in Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth, as well as being a Catholic priest. His views on whether or not we have now reached the end of Irish Catholicism are both pertinent and timely.

Like Inglis, Twomey notes how being Catholic is no longer a 'badge of honour.' Instead, "in the upwardly mobile, modern Ireland south of the border, it is more often than not an embarrassment to be reluctantly admitted." (p.17) He traces how this has come to pass, looks at the evolution of the Irish Catholic identity, with all its strengths and weaknesses. He is not afraid to apportion blame to the Irish church for its failure to discipline a tiny minority of its members who were engaged in what he refers to, somewhat euphemistically, as 'serious misdeeds':

"One of the questions raised is: why did no one do anything about these horror stories? Why did everyone keep silent? Why did so many conform? Why was there such a singular lack of moral courage? Perhaps it was the heavy price paid for becoming in effect the established Church of a fledgling and impoverished State." (p.33)

Hostile media

I think he is right in his assessment, as in many others that he offers. He says that the Irish media, while it performed good work in exposing the extent of clerical sex abuse, is the most hostile to the church in the developed world. What is equally true, and this is also pointed out by Twomey, is the lack of talented performers among the present bishops, men who can argue the toss with journalists and commentators, no matter how hostile they are. The role, or perceived role, played by the clergy in suppressing freedom of expression in Ireland, is one possible reason why they are not given a fair deal by journalists. Lay people like William Binchy have shown

that arguments can be put forward in a cogent and intellectual manner, on issues of morality.

Absence of a theological tradition

Twomey notes the absence of any genuine theological tradition in Ireland, even among the clergy. He contrasts the Irish situation with that which prevails in France (a country with a strong tradition of

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secularism and anti-clericalism) where the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Lustiger, can tackle in an erudite and convincing manner the major questions afflicting society and debate them in public. As Twomey observes: "When he (Lustiger) enters the fray of public debate, he does so from an unapologetically theological perspective, and yet without any trace of dogmatism." (p.156) He goes on to say that no matter how difficult the situation was in France, the church there continued to think, and think theologically.

Fallow times

This has not been the case in Ireland. I have always felt that it is a huge lack that there is no Irish Catholic newspaper on the lines of *La Croix* or *The Tablet*. *The Irish Catholic* has developed under the stewardship of David Quinn (another feisty and accomplished lay defender of the Catholic Church), but it is nowhere near possessing the intellectual and cultural finesse of its foreign equivalents. Twomey makes the following point in relation to why we have fallen on such fallow times in terms of intellectual debate on this island:

"The real materialism of the

Church in Ireland is not manifest in the excesses of the nouveaux riches, but in her serious disinterest in serious thought of any metaphysical or theological nature." (p.157)

France, a country I know quite well, is a place where the value of

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the intellectual argument takes precedence over the person who presents it. You are not automatically labelled a fundamentalist if you express interest in the Catholic novelist, Georges Bernanos, for example. How would a similar expression of

interest in Canon Sheehan go down here? And yet he exerted a huge influence on generations of Irish men and women.

Not so bleak

If other Irish writers and commentators of the calibre of Tom Inglis and Vincent Twomey continue to debate the role and function of Irish Catholicism, I believe that the future may not be as bleak as it is sometimes painted. We are going through a traumatic transition from being a small, poor, religious country on the edge of Europe to being a highly prosperous, hi-tech centre, which has moved away from a blind allegiance to the church triumphant. Let us not forget, either, the negative side of Catholicism, which constantly emphasised our sinfulness. People were told to 'offer up' their suffering to God, to pray for guidance. Here is how Tony Flannery described the spiritual doxa as it was handed down to him:

"It was a negative spirituality. It had negative things to say about life, about the world, about creation, about humanity and about the individual. It set up a conflict between the world and the spirit, between the body and the soul. It despised creation. It proclaimed life here on earth was not important in itself, but merely a preparation for eternity. It led to the suppression of the human person, who was most of all a sinner. (*The Death of Religious Life*, Columba Press, 1997, pp.19-20)

When you think about it, the uncertainty of the present is not all bad! I would take it in preference to what Tony Flannery describes in the quote above. I have confidence that the problems that are currently besetting the Catholic Church will ultimately lead to a new, more theologically informed, open and charitable institution. However, as I don't possess the prescience of Bernanos' saintly characters, I, like everyone else, will have to wait and see. ■